SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Dr. Edgar E. Smith

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson & Amanda Lyons

June 27, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

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Participant: Smith, Dr. Edgar E.

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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit *"Freedom Rides: Journey for Change"* conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

DAWSON: Okay today is Monday, June 27, 2011. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and I am talking today with Dr. Edgar Smith and he's going to share with us his thoughts on the Civil Rights Era.

SMITH: Good, good afternoon. Yes, I'm Edgar, Edgar E. Smith. As I was saying earlier, I did not experience the Civil Rights Movement in the South because I was graduated from Tougaloo College in 1955 and from there I went to graduate school at Purdue and when I received a doctorate at Purdue I went to a post doc at Harvard Medical School and there from the faculty—from there—to the faculty of Boston University School of Medicine in University of Massachusetts, I am a biochemist by training, and I've, I am a native of the Mississippi Delta. I grew up in Hollandale, Mississippi and I lived there until age 12, my parents moved to Vicksburg, Mississippi and I graduated high school at Bowman High in Vicksburg, which no longer exists, and from there to Tougaloo College. So, I, I was at Tougaloo College actually at the time of the…1954 Supreme Court decision.

[*TECHNICAL CONVERSATION*]

DAWSON: It didn't stop. It never stopped.

SMITH: It never stopped?

DAWSON: The beeping was the battery, circa 2011.

SMITH: That's alright, as I was saying, at the time of the Supreme Court decision I was a student at Tougaloo College so I was well aware of the gravity of that decision but I left the state a year later so I wasn't here when much of the reaction to the Supreme Court decision came about. I wasn't in, in Mississippi at the time, but my wife, by the way, is from Oxford, Mississippi, so we were well aware of what was happening around the James Meredith case however, because her father owned the, the only black owned business on the Square, Wallace Shoe Shop, and they kept us abreast of what was going on around James Meredith. So whereas we were not here physically, we knew what was going on, and of course we were here spiritually, and we never really left the South because we were concerned about what was, what was happening down here, but we were limited as to the level of our involvement, so we found ourselves, however, being involved in some things that were happening in Massachusetts at the time, because I don't know if you recall, there were some riots, particularly after the death of Martin Luther King, and people became excited at a number of these suburban places and Boston was not excluded. Fortunately for us, James Brown was appearing in Boston at the time of the Martin Luther King's assassination and he was able to sort of quell the crowd, so we didn't

have any riots in Boston per se but the people were upset, James Brown together with the mayor of Boston at that time, was able to sort of quell the violence so there was no violence, but there was some reaction, and the reaction took place, took in the form of things like Freedom Schools. People had decided they were going to not attend the regular schools for a while and set up Freedom Schools, so I taught in some of the Freedom Schools that—while—I was living in Boston. However when we moved to Lexington, Massachusetts, I became involved in the Lexington Civil Rights Committee. Now the issue in the North or the Northeast was a little bit different from down here, the issue in the Northeast had to do primarily with housing. Segregated housing, discrimination in housing, and we ran into that when we attempted to buy a house in Lexington. At that time we had, we had four, four children and we were living in an apartment in Boston and we, we had outgrown the apartment so we wanted to buy a house, and so we had heard about the school system in Lexington and I was a country boy and it was, the people called it suburbia but I call it country, I, and I liked that whole concept and so did my wife and so we looked for a home in Lexington and, not to our surprise, I started to say much to our surprise but that's not true because I knew the situation there, we ran into some situations where people did not show us places because we were black and either directly or indirectly they would—once they found out—that we were black they would not show up or something to that effect, and one particular place we looked at a house, I'll never forget this, in the place, the guy showed us the house and at that time, I had—we had—the four sons and we left and went back into, we lived in Roxbury, which is like the black neighborhood in Boston, and we were at home and this guy gave us a call and said "Edgar, one of my neighbors came over and was talking to me after you left," and said that, "He said, he noticed you were showing the house to some colored people." And he said "Yes." "And they had boys, they had sons." And the fellow said, "Yes." And he said "Well, you know, I have some girls, you know, I'm concerned about that." I said "Well you tell him that my, my oldest son right now is…six years old and he's not dating too heavily, but if he's anything like his father you might be in trouble." I just wanted to get, you know, sock it to him if I could, but the long and short of it is, we did get a house in Lexington, in a neighborhood where we were the only Blacks. But we had some very nice neighbors, matter of fact, we're still in touch with those neighbors, some of them now, still some of the past, we are still in touch with them. But being in Boston—being in Lexington—did not remove us from what was happening in Boston. I said I became chairman of the Lexington Civil Rights Committee that was focused primarily on the whole issue of segregated housing.

But there were some other issues going on in Boston that we were getting involved in, some had to do with the whole busing issue. I'm sure you've heard about that, and that was an effort of the part of black parents to get

their children exposed to better educational opportunity by busing them out of Boston. And the first busing effort was Operation Exodus, and that had a certain degree of success, however the most successful busing effort which is still going on is called METCO, M-E-T-C-O, and I've forgotten what that's an acronym for, but it's still a busing situation in which they're busing because the public school system in Boston leaves a lot to be desired and those, those schools like many urban areas are occupied primarily by Blacks, and so there were, and so I became, I became a member of the advisory board for the METCO program in Jackson because we were busing some of the students into, into Lexington as well as some of the other areas, so that was another involvement.

And we developed a summer program. We were trying to get the kids in the suburbia to, to interact with the kids in the urban areas. We developed a summer program which was unlike summer programs that had been developed in other places; other places developed summer programs that were one way, in that the kids from the urban communities were coming out to see suburbia, you know, enjoying the…the…all of the, the things that suburbia had to offer, and then going back home. I said, "No we're not gonna do it that way. We're gonna do it both ways. I want the kids in suburbia to appreciate what's happening in the city," and it worked very well. We got it set up with the YMCA, so that they had this swimming pool in Lexington, well when they came to Boston they went to the YMCA to, to swim. They had parks in Lexington, when they went to Boston they went to, to the park out in Boston to see that there's, that, the, the, those areas had something to offer to those kids, that they could learn from and that was unlike anything that anybody else had done and I did that as a member of the Lexington Civil Rights Committee.

Now in addition to those kinds of things that my wife and I were involved in, when I say I, my wife was involved in all these things too. Her name is Inez. We've been married 56 years, by the way. We married three days before we graduated at, at Tougaloo. So we were involved in all the things that, that were going on, both in the city and in the town of Lexington, and one of the activities in which we were involved was supporting efforts that we knew about in the South, primarily financially, and three of those efforts were: MACE, the Mississippi Action for Community Education, which was based in Greenville, Larry Farmer was, Larry Farmer was the head at that time and we sent money down to Larry, matter of fact, I should've brought the letter from him. I wish I'd brought that, I've got it. We also supported the Delta Ministry that Owen Brooks was working with at that time. Owen actually came from Boston, to head up that program. And finally, but most importantly to us, was our connection with Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer. Everybody knew what Fannie Lou was trying to do and it had become public knowledge when she appeared at the convention. And so the effort was made on the part of us and some other folk in Lexington community to

assist her any way that we could. She needed money, she needed clothing and so forth, and so we maintained that contact with her by sending that, the money down, sending clothing to her. And one of the most valuable pieces of history that we have in our possession is a letter from Ms. Hamer thanking us for those efforts and I'd like to read that, if I may.

DAWSON: Yes. It's handwritten.

SMITH: And it's handwritten. Directly from her and it was sent to us January 24, 1968. From Mrs. F. L. Hamer, 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, 38771. To Dr. and Mrs. Edgar E. Smith, 81 Hill Street, Lexington, Massachusetts, 02173.

And she actually addressed the letter to my wife, Mrs. Edgar E. Smith, 81 Hill Street, Lexington, Massachusetts. And I'm going to read it the way it was written. Okay?

DAWSON: Okay.

SMITH:

> "Dear Mrs. Smith, This is to assure you your letters and checks also, also all the boxes. Mrs. Smith, the money was so much help. I've been sick again and couldn't have gone to the—to see —a doctor if you all hadn't helped me. I just wish I could put in writing how I feel about, about what you are doing for us. It make my heart feel so good when I see somebody fixed up real nice and you all, with Hall's and the Morrison's, don't have no dreams of how much you are doing. Thank God for all of you who care. Please send me the Jick's address so I can write them. You know, Mrs. Smith, I've lasted a long time behind the beatings I get in jail, but it is catching up with me, fast. My whole body sometime is sore. But I'm a have to work until my days are done. Please send thanks to the Hall's and Morrison's. We shall never forget you all. Oh by the way, I mailed Mr. Davis a lot of names and addresses yesterday. Thank you all for everything.
> Yours for God and justice for all men.
> Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer."

The names that I mentioned in there, the Morrison's, the Hall's, the Jick's, were other families who were working with us and were sending boxes down, boxes of clothing and money and the other gentleman here, Mr. Davis, was our—my—best friend in, in, in Massachusetts, Andrew Davis, he's, he's dead now and he got some additional names of people and they were sending—he was sending—money and clothing down to them, so those are the kinds of things in which we were involved primarily in the Civil Rights Movement. We weren't here, but there were issues in the North

that had to be dealt with around housing, around schooling, and we tried as best we could to involve ourselves, that's why at the same time keeping abreast of what was going on down here, we knew what was happening with the Freedom Riders and we talked about it, when people, it's interesting, knowing that we were from Mississippi, oft time when people would come to us get some kinds of factual information and if we weren't there but we had to be factual, so we could give as much information as we could based on what we knew and not being present at the time. But those were, those were interesting times for us there and surely for the people here and I'm, I'm so happy to be able to be back in Mississippi now to see the changes that they made in Mississippi and to be here when the Freedom Riders come, and, and express and talk about their experiences. They were out at Tougaloo, Tougaloo was included as part of their trip, and just to meet with them and as you know, we gave Hank—Tougaloo gave—Hank Thomas an honorary degree. He was there, and, and John Lewis was the commencement speaker, so we had two Freedom Riders on stage at commencement for Tougaloo and that was a, that was an outstanding event and I'm so happy that my wife and I were back home at this time to see this happen in Mississippi. We love Mississippi, otherwise we wouldn't come back. We've been away since 1955, but Mississippi is home.

DAWSON: I just had, I had a couple questions.

SMITH: Yeah.

DAWSON: What did, when you were in Boston and things would go on in Mississippi with Civil Rights and everything, when they would ask you, you know, to provide the facts or what you knew of it, what was the general perception of Northerners about Mississippi?

SMITH: Well, that it was a very tough place for black people, just to sum it up.

DAWSON: Right.

SMITH: You know, rather getting to particulars, that it was a very, very tough place for, for black people and they only knew, many of them, what they had read and, but they, sometimes I had to have them understand that they might be looking at it through jaundiced eyes themselves because there were some issues in the North as well as in the South, and I wasn't excusing the South because I said I grew up in Mississippi, in the Delta and the Delta was tough for black folk and I picked a whole lotta cotton in my life, so I know what I'm talking about. But the physical plant, Mississippi's a beautiful state. I love the physical plant, I really do, I mean, it's just some of the people make a problem sometime. So what I had to do—what we had to do—was to try to clarify for them as much as we could why we still were interested in being in Mississippi. Because if it's so bad, why do you want

to go back there? Well actually, no there's some things you have to understand but we know as, for instance, we used to say, we know what's happening in Mississippi. Oft times we didn't really know how the people felt in the North, because they wouldn't, weren't laying it out to you, they, they would smile in your face and stab you in the back. They didn't do that in Mississippi, you knew what you were dealing with, straight out, you didn't like it, but you knew. If you know your enemy you can fight it, but when you don't, you know, you really don't, you can't develop a defense. If you really don't know, so to me that was the difference in the North versus the South. And so we had to have them understand that there were things they had to think about when they judged the South, giving them the facts as much as we could and having them understand there were some issues that they had to deal with at the same time. That's why we were so much involved in Lexington Civil Rights Committee and I have, I was also involved in the protest against the war in Vietnam. If you recall John Kerry was arrested on Lexington Green, 1971. I was part of that, I was arrested with him, matter of fact, I mentioned that to him when he came down here, and he remembered those, those times and we talked about it and as a result the, there's a committee in Lexington, the name of which escapes me…that is developing a program around the 1971 protest because many people who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement were also involved as part of the Anti-war Movement, you remember, Martin Luther King was very much involved in the Anti-war Movement and, in November of this year there, of course will be sorta like 40 years after 1971 protest, I've been invited back to Lexington to be a part of that panel, to talk about what was happening in Lexington around Civil Rights and around the war, during those times.

DAWSON: And then you've talked about this kinda but I just want to, want to ask you more directly. When you left Mississippi, did you have family here or what was it that made you care to stay in touch and to send the money back to the three groups?

SMITH: Okay.

DAWSON: 'Cause you were fighting a battle on two fronts.

SMITH: Right. Absolutely. Well, there was some family left here but my immediate family wasn't. My mother and father had moved to Gary, while I was in… in college, and my dad had gotten a job at a steel, at one of the steel mills in Gary, so he, then they started a younger family and so they were there but I had some relatives that were in Mississippi but they were not really, of course my wife on the other hand, all of her relatives, her mother and father were still in Oxford so she had stronger connection.

But I think it was more my feeling for the people who represented the community in which I grew up. I mean I really felt a part of that community, you know. Hillary Clinton didn't invent the statement if it takes a village to raise a child. These small villages were raising us, and I always feel a commitment, that's why right now I'm doing some things in, in the Delta through the Blues Commission and through, I'm on the Blues Commission and I'm on the Board of Directors of the B. B. King Museum, trying to develop the blues as economic development for those small communities because they have nothing else. Cotton is no longer a major industry. Catfish isn't. But it was those—that—community; I owe a lot to that community and communities like that. And since I didn't come back to make a contribution directly, you know, many people went, came back to teach, well I was a research scientist, there wasn't anything for me to do here. But I had to make a, a contribution some way. So when I say, I mean, our contribution was through doing whatever we could, that was making it, making a monetary contribution or the clothing, because we feel that we are still a part of that community and I feel an absolute obligation because that community did so much for me, I mean that community, I lived next door to the biggest juke joint in the town, okay, and I could've gone in several directions, okay, but folks in that community saw that that wasn't gonna happen to me and I've said that in all sincerity, because I was being raised by my grandmother and my great-grandmother, and I had an aunt around the corner, who was a lot like my Auntie Mame. She would make sure I went to the movies and things like, she couldn't read or write her name. And I was the first person to graduate from high school and to go on to college and things like that, but I learned something from that situation. It had to do with caring about people, wasn't caring about material things, it was caring about people, people were giving you what they had. Whatever they had to give you, whether it was material or immaterial, they would give that to you, to try to ensure your success and I'm paying a debt. That's what, that's really what I owe all I am to, to my family and the community that raised me. And I think if folk like myself do not come back and do those kinds of things, it's not going to happen. And I feel frustrated now that I can't do more because I see what's happening in terms of, I go to my, my town Hollandale and it's like a third world country, there's nothing there for people to do. They have no jobs. The catfish processing plant is closed down. Cotton, well, is mechanized now, people don't pick cotton anymore. But there's people that talk about economic development in Mississippi around our cultural heritage, around the blues, around Civil Rights, around the Civil War, all these various trails that were being built, that's, I think that's going to be Mississippi's salvation, is cultural heritage. You have something other people don't have. Well it's incumbent upon those of us who are involved in it to be ensure that people who are part of that cultural heritage, everyone benefits from it, that's like from the blues. And so, as I said, I feel like I'm, I'm paying a, paying a debt and I wouldn't

be comfortable if I didn't do it otherwise, yeah 'cause I've been retired several times.

DAWSON: Anything else?

SMITH: I don't think so, I…oh I did mention, I forgot to mention one thing. Why as an example of what we were doing with the Lexington Civil Rights Committee. I have before me, what I wanted the people of Lexington to know, Lexington as you know is a suburb of Boston. It's a historic town, you know, Paul Revere rode through on to Concord and all that kind of stuff. But I wanted to maintain the contact with Boston, and the Black community in Boston is Roxbury. But as chairman of Lexington Civil Rights Committee I wanted to know that the people in Boston were doing some things for themselves. And what we were gonna do were to help them, help them do what they're doing, we're not really initiating it and so I put—we put—together, the Lexington Civil Rights Committee, put together a brochure entitled "All About Self Help Programs in Roxbury" and this is the, what I wrote in preface to this:

> "Dear Friend, quote "What are they—what are they—doing to help themselves" end of quote. This is a question that which you have no doubt heard or perhaps even voiced yourself in reference to the Roxbury community. Well, the answer is quote "A heck of a lot" un—end—quote. This brochure represents an attempt on the part of the Lexington Civil Rights Committee to acquaint you with a few of these self-help projects. The programs described are but a sampling of the many efforts in the areas of education, employment, recreation, etc. on part of the community to improve its lot. The methods employed are as diverse as the personalities of the individuals involved, yet the final goal is the same, self improvement. You're probably asking yourself, where do I, as an outsider fit in these programs? First of all, you're not an outsider, for the problems faced by the inner city are not solely their own making and therefore not theirs alone to solve. Second, while the people directly involved are substantially motivated, they are drastically in need of support, primarily financial, therefore we genuinely hope that you will become sufficiently interested in one or more of these projects to the extent of lending it your support. To obtain additional information about any of these groups please feel free to contact them at the telephone numbers listed. Additional copies of this brochure may be obtained from the Lexington Civil Rights Committee.
> Edgar E. Smith, Chairman, Lexington Civil Rights Committee."

And what this does is list and gives a little synopsis of a variety of programs

in Roxbury, that where people are really trying to help themselves and they need help from the outside. I wanted to make sure that I mentioned that.

DAWSON: Thank you very much.

SMITH: Thank you. Thank you, this has been a pleasure.

END OF RECORDING

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